

Nixon vs. Kim: Gauging the parameters of power

AN EXERCISE IN RESTRAINT

After less than 100 days in office, Richard Nixon found himself face to face with his first major foreign crisis. Once again, the warnings were sounded only after disaster had struck. Once again, the North Korean Communists had pounced with savage suddenness upon an American spy vessel and presented the U.S. with a brutal *fait accompli*. And though this time there were no prisoners in enemy hands, no months of anguished waiting ahead and no prospect of constant reminders of national humiliation, the U.S. dilemma was nonetheless just as cruel. For the loss of the "flying Pueblo" and its crew in the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan immediately plunged the U.S. into a soul-searching examination of the parameters of its global power.

Both in style and substance, Mr. Nixon's performance under pressure was a revelation of a new kind of Presidential metabolism. Significantly, he sought neither to rally the nation with the stirring rhetoric of a John F. Kennedy nor to reassure it with the dramatic flurry of a Lyndon Johnson. Instead, with the sobering lessons of Vietnam and the first Pueblo incident fresh in his mind, the President seemed almost obsessed with defusing, through his own calm example, the perilous potentials of the confrontation. Thus, upon learning early last week that a U.S. Navy EC-121 electronic intelligence plane had been shot down by North Korean MIG fighters, Mr. Nixon met with a group of Congressional leaders and pointedly told them: "I don't want the tensions in the country to rise over this." And to underscore his meaning, he himself waited three full days before making his first public utterance on the subject.

As his forum, the President chose a nationally televised press conference—his fifth since assuming office. From the moment he stepped before the cameras,

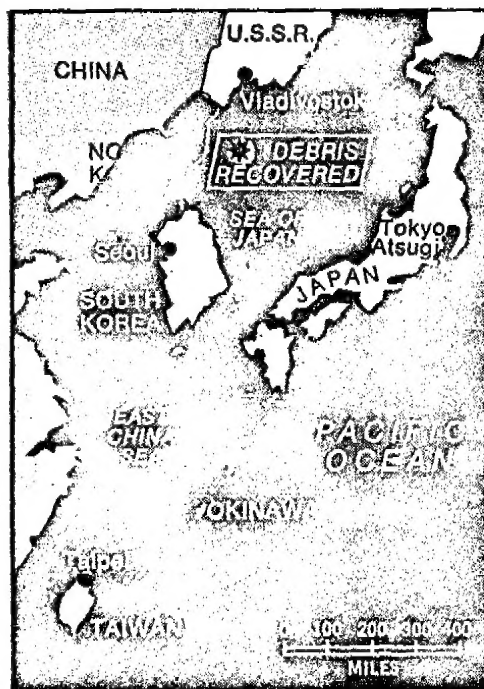
it was clear that Mr. Nixon was nervous—a fact attested to by a number of uncharacteristic errors in syntax and a thrice-repeated slip of the tongue in which he referred to South Korea when he meant to say South Vietnam. But if his Administration's test by fire had ruffled the President's composure, this was not reflected in his even-toned denunciation of the North Korean attack as "unprovoked, deliberate, without warning." Intelligence-gathering missions, declared Mr. Nixon, are necessary to the security of U.S. military forces in the Far East. Then he disclosed that after briefly suspending further spy flights off the coast of North Korea, he had decided to begin them again. "I have today ordered that these flights be continued,"

he said. "They will be protected. This is not a threat. It is merely a statement of fact."

For all its matter-of-factness, Mr. Nixon's press conference was perhaps the most dramatic exercise in Presidential restraint in recent memory. Indeed, the U.S. response to the blatant foreign challenge could hardly have been more dovish had Eugene McCarthy, rather than Richard Nixon, been sitting in the White House. This was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that during last fall's Presidential campaign candidate Nixon repeatedly used the seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo as an illustration of how even "a fourth-rate power like North Korea" no longer respected the U.S. "As far as I am concerned," Mr. Nixon declared at that time, "there isn't going to be another Pueblo in the next four years. We are not going to let that happen."

Review: In fairness to Mr. Nixon, his aides noted that partisan pledges made in the heat of a Presidential election campaign are one thing, while actually carrying out the complex task of administering the vast bureaucratic machinery of the U.S. Government is something altogether different. Accordingly, it was regrettable—but not surprising—that during its first three months in office, the Nixon Administration had not found time to make a thorough review of U.S. intelligence activities in the Sea of Japan. And although the Johnson Administration, in the wake of the seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo fifteen months ago, had canceled Korean spy missions by American naval vessels, the U.S. military establishment, with remarkable lack of imagination, had continued to dispatch unescorted intelligence aircraft on the hazardous flights along the fringes of North Korea.

Thus, it was a routine matter when, early one morning last week, a U.S. Navy EC-121—a military version of a Lockheed



Incident in Asia

*Super Constellation—roared down a runway at an American airbase in Atsugi, Japan, and headed northwest for Korea. The pilot of the plane, Lt. Comdr. James Howard Overstreet, 34, kept his four propeller-driven engines at full throttle to lift the plane's heavy load of supersecret listening devices. And as they approached Chongjin, a North Korean city near the Manchurian border, Overstreet and his crew of 29 Navy men and one U.S. marine (who was fluent in both Korean and Russian) made final preparations to carry out their dual intelligence mission: monitoring enemy radio communications and detecting enemy radar activity (page 30).

Abort: Hundreds of miles away on an island off the coast of Japan, a U.S. Air Force tracking station followed the blip of Overstreet's plane on its radar. Suddenly, two new blips appeared on the radar screen. A pair of supersonic North Korean MIG's were closing in fast on the EC-121. Within seconds the Air Force had flashed Overstreet a pre-arranged cryptographic message urgently ordering him to abort his mission. Slowly, Overstreet wheeled his lumbering 300-mph Connie into a turn and began to head back for base. But it was too late. The MIG's were on his tail—and, in a blinding flash, Overstreet, his crew and his plane were blasted out of the sky.

Inexplicably, it took the U.S. Air Force in Japan more than an hour to report the incident to the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon. By then, it was around 1 a.m. in Washington and a duty officer at the Pentagon phoned Henry A. Kissinger, the President's special assistant on national security affairs. Driving through the early morning darkness, Kissinger arrived at his basement office in the west wing of the White House and immediately began assembling an ad hoc "working group" to assess all the available information and draw up a list of options for the President. Finally, sometime after 3 a.m., Kissinger picked up the telephone and informed Mr. Nixon on that he faced a grave crisis. And having done so, Kissinger made his initial

recommendation to the President: No immediate action is required."

By dawn, various agencies of the government had begun to swing into action. Reports came in from Japan that a U.S. Navy patrol plane had spotted debris from the EC-121 in an area about 100 miles southeast of Chongjin. "Our first concern was for survivors," said one Pentagon official. "We wanted to make every possible effort to get planes and ships over there to pick up our people before the North Koreans did. The water temperature in that area of the Sea of Japan was about 40 degrees—which meant that if the crew of the plane wore survival clothing, they had a chance to live for an hour. And if they had a life raft, they could last even longer."

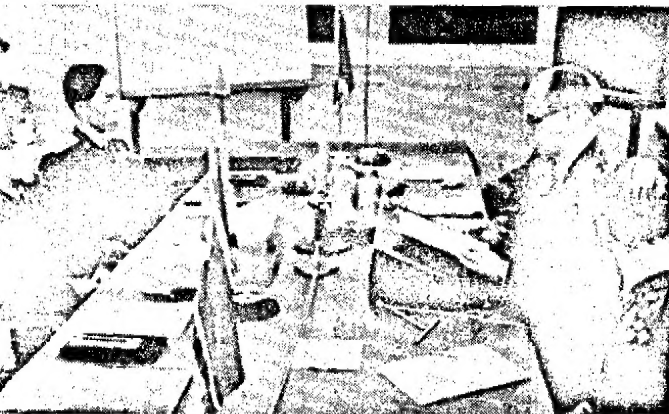
Prompt: The closest ships to the rescue area, it turned out, were two Russian destroyers out of Vladivostok. In Washington, Secretary of State William Rogers approached Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and requested his government's assistance in the rescue operation. And in Moscow, U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Emory C. Swank provided the Soviet Foreign Ministry with the map coordinates of the spot where the plane was thought to have gone down. Within hours, the Soviet vessels were on-scene and, aided by radioed guidance from hovering U.S. planes, began fishing wreckage out of the sea. The promptness of the Russian response both pleased and puzzled some observers. "Let's face it," said one high-ranking U.S. State Department official, "the Soviets saw a good opportunity to do a favor for Nixon in hope of getting something in return. They obviously wanted to soften any possible U.S. retaliation against North Korea. And because of their help, they perhaps expect that we won't make much of a fuss over their purge in Czechoslovakia."

Whatever the Soviet motive, the assistance of the Russian destroyers helped to establish early on two vital facts: that the EC-121 had clearly been shot down while flying over international waters and that, almost certainly, none of its crew had survived. (Later in the week, the

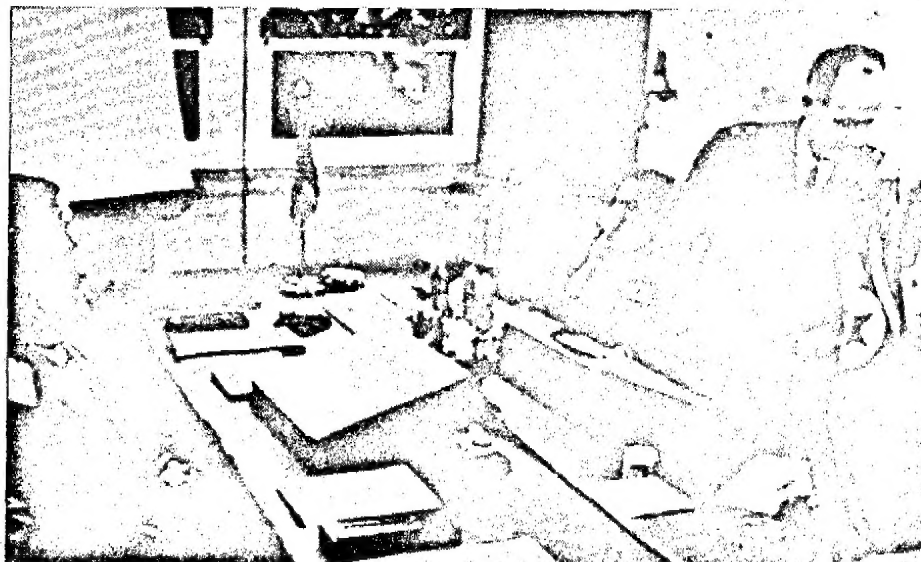
destroyer U.S.S. Tucker recovered the bodies of two of the EC-121 crew: Lt. (j.g.) Joseph R. Ribar of Abridge, Pa., and Aviation Electronics Technician 1/c Richard E. Sweeney of Chicago. But otherwise a rapidly assembled U.S. search armada found nothing but floating debris.)

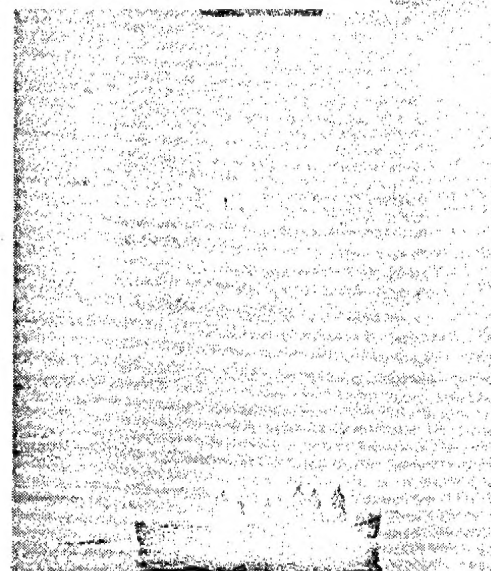
Even as the search continued, North Korea crowed over its latest humiliation of the U.S. In an English-language broadcast, Radio Pyongyang asserted that the ill-fated EC-121 had intruded "deep into the territorial air" of North Korea and that a Communist air force unit had "scored the brilliant battle success of shooting it down with a single shot." To refute the charge that the U.S. had violated North Korea's 12-mile territorial limit—and, just as important, to head off domestic demands for retaliatory measures—the President met with Republican Congressional leaders and gave them a full briefing. Though Mr. Nixon sought to enlist the congressmen in his campaign to keep tight wraps around the details of the incident, he was partly defeated in this effort by a curious twist of fate. For just before he launched into his plea for tight-lipped security, Senate Minority Leader Everett McKinley Dirksen stepped out of the Cabinet room to go to the men's room. As a result, Dirksen was not present when Mr. Nixon made his request.

'Proof': Thus it was Dirksen—and not the Nixon Administration—who first publicly divulged the details of how the spy plane had been lost. Sitting cross-legged on a table in the Senate Press Gallery, Dirksen apprised reporters of the Administration's claim that at no time during its mission did the EC-121 stray anywhere inside North Korean territorial airspace. Then, stepping before a battery of television cameras, he proceeded to answer questions. Would the Administration have the public's support if it took military action against North Korea? he was asked. "This bloody tussle in Vietnam has been going on a long time," Dirksen replied in his most mellifluous voice. "The country gets weary. I don't



At Panmunjom, U.S. General Knapp (above) condemns downing of U.S. intelligence plane by North Korea; then, prodded by Reds to identify plane's unit, he stalks out of Military Armistice Commission meeting.





Cooperative effort: While Soviet motor launch heads away from mother ship, U.S. crewmen search for debris

think they're prepared for any more bloodletting."

At first, the White House was furious with Dirksen for leaking the story. But it soon became apparent that the President and his advisers had somewhat misgauged the temper of the Congress and the country. For instead of indulging in the jingoistic outcry that the Administration had feared, most Americans, like Dirksen, rejected the military approach. Indeed, so widespread was this sentiment that even a superhawk like Colorado's Sen. Peter Dominick, when asked by a Washington newsmen whether he thought the Communists "should be permitted to get away with this," shrugged and replied: "Well, I don't see that we've got much choice."

Inevitably, there were those who disented and who wanted to see the U.S. teach the North Koreans a lesson. That, indeed, was the view of Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the skipper of the Pueblo. "The North Koreans have a small submarine force," Bucher remarked last week. "Suppose they sent a couple of subs into San Diego harbor and attacked two of our carriers. I wonder what we would do about that? I mean, I wonder just how far we are going to permit them to go without doing something about it?"

Protest: But although, early in the crisis, the President ordered U.S. forces in the Pacific to be ready for action if necessary, his own evident intention was to avoid not only military force but even excessive diplomatic activity. Indeed, the first direct U.S. protest at the shooting down of the spy plane was not made until late in the week when the North Koreans called for a meeting of the Korean Armistice Commission at Panmunjom. There, in the familiar blue-painted Quonset hut where the U.S. and North Korea had held 289 previous meetings, U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. James B. Knapp accused the North Koreans of a "calculated act of aggression." (When the

Communist delegate demanded to know to what unit the downed American spy plane belonged, Knapp abruptly walked out of the meeting.) Apart from this, the only U.S. diplomatic move was to circulate copies of Knapp's statement among members of the U.N. Security Council. No formal protest was made to the Council, however, since that would almost certainly have met with a Soviet veto.

There were, of course, good reasons for Mr. Nixon's decision to refrain from using force. For in every case, his military options—such as a blockade of North Korea or a limited air strike against a MIG air base—involved enormous risks. As the President himself pointed out last week in his press conference, a U.S. retaliatory blow against North Korea would, at the very least, court the extreme displeasure of the Soviet Union—and perhaps dash the chances for reaching an accommodation with Moscow on a Vietnamese peace settlement and other important world issues.

War: Even more important, Mr. Nixon had to consider that any retaliatory blow against North Korea could conceivably spark another land war in Asia. Nor was this as remote a possibility as it might first appear. For far from being a fourth-rate power, Communist North Korea is considered by most U.S. military experts to be the most truculent and—in the short run—the most dangerous adversary the U.S. faces in Asia. Located on the strategic rim of both Communist China and the Soviet Union, North Korea could, in a crunch, draw on the resources of these two Communist giants. And while North Korea has a smaller army than South Korea (350,000 men vs. 530,000), Pyongyang boasts a 3-to-1 advantage over Seoul in jet fighters and has a highly trained militia force of 1.3 million men and women. "If they wanted to take the heavy casualties," says one U.S. expert, "the North Koreans could break through the Demilitarized Zone and invade the

South. And the Pyongyang leadership is considered just cold-blooded enough to try it."

Whether, in fact, Pyongyang is preparing for such an attack is a matter of intense speculation in the U.S. intelligence community. What is clear, however, is that North Korea's tough, wily Premier Kim Il Sung, faced with mounting economic and political difficulties at home, has mobilized his entire nation of 13 million people for what he vows will be a final armed showdown with South Korea. After his most recent visit to North Korea, Wilfred Burchett, the Australian Communist journalist, reported: "Every village through which I passed ... has merry-go-round-type gadgets around which models of U.S. planes and helicopters soar and dive and release parachutists while local militia adjust sights for counterfire. Inside villages and along roads, signs are all devoted to warnings that a new crisis is at hand, that war may come at any moment."

In a sense, the war has already begun. Over the past two years, Kim Il Sung has stepped up his military pressure against the south, regularly infiltrating hundreds of guerrillas across the DMZ. In one case last year, a group of Communist commandos, with instructions to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung Hee, came within 800 yards of Park's palace in Seoul before they were discovered.

Pullout: But as Kim Il Sung is aware, North Korea has no chance of "liberating" the south as long as 55,000 American troops remain there. Thus, in the view of U.S. experts, the seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo as well as last week's MIG attack on the EC-121 (an attack that, probably not coincidentally, took place on Kim's 57th birthday) were obvious attempts by North Korea to fan isolationist sentiment in the U.S. and to undermine the faith of the South Koreans in Washington's will to fight. Says a U.S. diplomat in Japan: "I would say that, with all this talk of U.S.

troop withdrawals from North Korea are anxious to ingratiate us, to get the American people believing that we ought to pull out from all these dangerous activities in exposed forward positions."

If this was, in fact, the long-range goal of North Korea's leaders, their decision last week to attack an American spy plane seemed to have backfired. For as President Nixon made clear at his press conference, the U.S. intelligence missions along the North Korean coast will not only be continued, but from now on the planes will be provided with armed escorts. In order to provide this kind of protection, Mr. Nixon last week ordered the Navy to begin assembling in the Sea of Japan a massive task force, including the nuclear carrier Enterprise and the carriers Ticonderoga and Ranger as well as a number of destroyers, cruisers and supply ships. In addition, the battleship New Jersey, which had been steaming for port in the U.S. after six months' duty off the coast of Vietnam, was ordered to turn back and join the Seventh Fleet near Korea.

From the decks of the carriers—and, perhaps, from air bases in South Korea as well—U.S. jet fighters will fly cover for the intelligence flights. But while this measure may deter future North Korean attacks on U.S. spy planes, it is not without its serious drawbacks. For one thing, Pentagon officials concede that the presence of the additional planes will "degrade" the productivity of the intelligence missions by prompting the North Koreans to switch off some of their more sophisticated radar equipment and to clamp restrictions on their radio traffic. Even more important, the large-scale operation in the Sea of Japan will be staggeringly expensive. "The North Korean attack actually has made these missions too costly to be worthwhile," one Pentagon official said last week. "Certainly, the missions will have to be re-evaluated on the basis of cost effectiveness. I don't see how we can justify keeping an aircraft carrier and supporting ships worth well over half a billion dollars to provide protection."

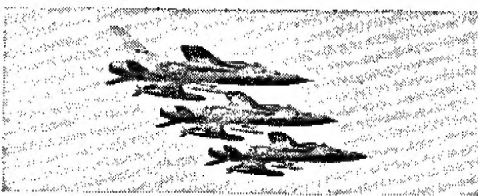
Limited Use: All of which raised the question of whether the spy game was worth the candle. Characteristically, Sen. J. William Fulbright last week proclaimed: "I can't conceive of any information these planes pick up that warrants the kind of risk they are taking." And others wondered why the U.S. could not replace the vulnerable EC-121s with spy-in-the-sky satellites. Military experts, however, argue that the satellites, which pass overhead quickly and do not tune in on certain radar frequencies, had a limited usefulness. And they pointed out that as long as the regime of Kim Il Sung openly continued to threaten war, it was vital for the U.S. to collect intelligence on the disposition of North Korean military units and their state of readiness.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the highly fallible judgment displayed by

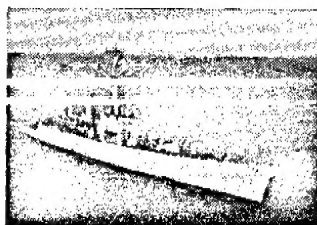
most Americans appeared to accept the arguments of the military on this matter. There was, in fact, a notable lack of criticism in Congress against President Nixon's decision to continue the intelligence flights—even though his parallel decision to provide them with armed escorts inevitably increased the risks of conflict between the U.S. and North Korea. Indeed, judging from the mild statements made by spokesmen of both the left and the right, Americans generally seemed to have acquired a new sophistication about the fact that great powers must indulge in clandestine activities—and that those activities are inherently dangerous.

But if Americans seemed more willing than in the past to bear certain kinds of unpleasant responsibilities, they also

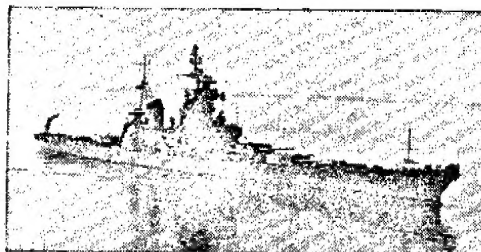
THE GUARDIANS



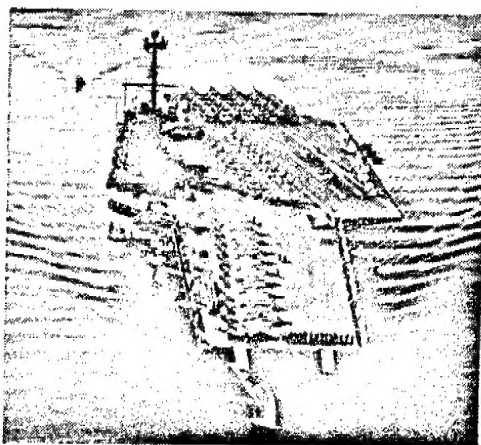
U.S. F-105 jets: Providing cover



U.S.S. Dale: Sea search



U.S.S. New Jersey: Back on duty



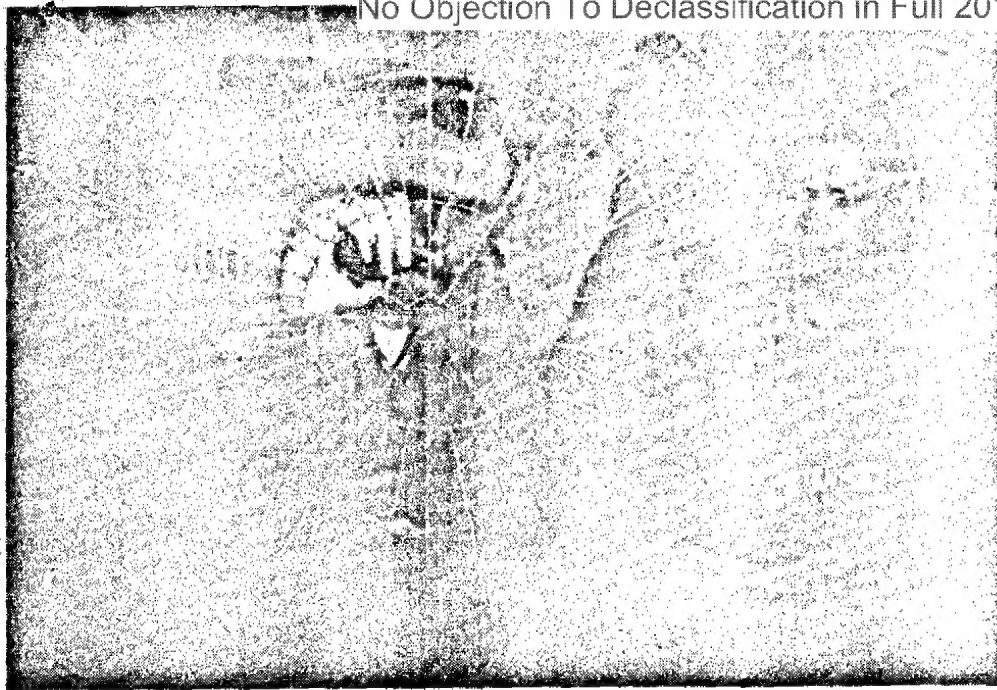
U.S.S. Ranger: Standing by

what they and their country could be called upon to do. And in this, Richard Nixon seemed to concur. More than any of his recent predecessors, Mr. Nixon has an acute awareness of the limitations of Presidential power and a determination to act within those limits. This is not to say that he is comfortable with his self-imposed shackles. But his action—or, more accurately, lack of action—in the face of his first foreign crisis indicated that he has set himself a course of restraint and caution in dealing with external challenges that does not directly threaten the vital interests of the U.S.

In large part, of course, Mr. Nixon is inhibited by the realities of the Vietnamese war. The notion of engaging in other foreign military ventures while half a million U.S. troops are tied down in Vietnam is, to the President's way of thinking, almost unimaginable. But beyond the Vietnam straitjacket, there is yet another major inhibiting factor on Mr. Nixon's freedom of action—the growing equalization of Soviet and U.S. nuclear power. "I would remind the members of this press corps," the President told his news conference last week, "that at [the time of the Cuban missile crisis] all the professional experts agreed that the U.S. superiority was at least 4 to 1 and maybe 5 to 1 over the Soviet Union in terms of over-all nuclear capability. Now, we don't have that today. That gap has been closed. We shall never have it again."

'Bipolarity': In a sense, Mr. Nixon's performance last week seemed to be a direct application of a theory put forth by his chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger. In a recent essay, Kissinger argued that "military bipolarity" has made it increasingly difficult for either Washington or Moscow to deal with smaller powers. "The paradox of contemporary military strength," wrote Kissinger, "is that a gargantuan increase in power has eroded its relationship to policy. The major nuclear powers are capable of devastating each other. But they have great difficulty translating this capability into policy except to prevent direct challenges to their own survival—and this condition is interpreted with increasing strictness. In other words, power no longer translates automatically into influence."

Judging by his behavior last week, it seemed clear that President Nixon is in large—if possibly reluctant—agreement with this view. This, of course, is a far cry from Mr. Nixon's activist campaign oratory and even further from his cold-warrior stance of the 1950s. Yet his new position is in tune with the contemporary mood of the U.S. For Richard Nixon inherited a country in no way prepared for new, large-scale foreign engagements and he is adjusting his style accordingly. As President, he has proved himself to be cautious, cool and capable of swallowing his pride even when it hurts—as it undoubtedly did last week.



CBS News

Aboard an EC-121: Plotting the enemy's position

THE VARIETIES OF ELINT

There was no uncertainty whatever as to where this plane was," President Richard M. Nixon said last week of the downed U.S. EC-121 intelligence aircraft. "We knew this, based on our radar. We know what [North Korean] radar showed. We, incidentally, know what the Russian radar showed. All three radars showed exactly the same thing."

Even to the layman, it came as no surprise to learn that U.S. radar sites in Japan and South Korea had plotted accurately the position of the big EC-121 until it was shot down by North Korean MIG jet fighters, some 70 miles off the North Korean coast. But how did Mr. Nixon know what the Russian and Korean radars revealed?

Pentagon officials declined to elaborate on the President's statement. But to electronic experts the answer seemed clear: U.S. "listening-post" stations in South Korea and Japan—equipped with extremely sensitive radio receivers—must have intercepted communications between North Korean radar operators and the pilots of the North Korean MIG's and between Russian bases and the two Soviet destroyers prowling in the Sea of Japan. These communications may have been sent via conventional radio or by coded electronic signals in the so-called "data link" technique. Even if the signals were in code—which they probably were—the U.S. not only detected them, but deciphered them. And deciphered, the messages probably revealed the precise navigational coordinates given the North Korean MIG's to bring them up behind the slow, propeller-driven EC-121.

Remarkable as it sounds, this kind of

feat is now taken for granted by the military. The technology of electronic intelligence (known in military jargon as "elint") has grown so incredibly sophisticated in recent years that it is not much of an exaggeration to state that a foreign power can scarcely throw a switch without a U.S. spy satellite, ship or aircraft taking note of it. U.S. fighter-bombers in Vietnam, for example, carry electronic alarms of such acute sensitivity that they register when the North Vietnamese simply turn on a radar to warm it up—even before the transmitter begins spewing out its pulses of electrical energy.

'Grass': In recent years, the U.S. has placed ground-based elint stations around the Asian mainland, from northern Japan down around to Thailand, to eavesdrop on the Chinese, North Koreans, North Vietnamese and Russians. These carefully guarded sites normally contain forests of telephone poles topped by a spider's web of wires. These are "antenna fields" and they serve the same purpose as a television antenna: they pull in weak electronic signals from distant sources. But they do so with incredible efficiency; U.S. experts say that these antenna fields can pull the faintest signals out of the "grass"—engineering jargon for the static always heard in radio transmissions.

But there are limits to what such ground stations—and the military reconnaissance satellites as well—can detect. And to fill in these gaps, the U.S. uses a variety of aircraft and surface vessels—such as the EC-121 and the Pueblo. Beating up and down the coasts of Asia, these aircraft and ships turn their anten-

tions. The information the spy craft gather is extremely varied: sometimes they pick up the vector commands issued by a command post to jet fighters in flight or the routine radio traffic between a headquarters and troops in the field; on other occasions they produce data revealing the electronic characteristics of an air-defense system or the operational capabilities of landing systems at military airfields.

Sentry: For the EC-121, producing such intelligence is a relatively new function. A modified version of the civilian Super-Constellation, the EC-121 was first developed as a radar-picket aircraft for the defense of the continental U.S. During the 1950s, the big airplanes ranged far out over the Atlantic and Pacific, sweeping their radar through the skies in search of approaching Russian bombers. But with the advent of long-range radars, the EC-121 was no longer needed as an airborne sentry, and so it was modified again to fit its present role as a spy plane. (In Vietnam, however, the plane has been used in other roles as well. Some EC-121s have been used to transport South Vietnamese officers who issue bogus marching orders, over intercepted radio wavelengths, to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops.)

Physically, the EC-121 is not a particularly handsome craft. Two huge radomes protrude like goiters from the top and bottom of the original graceful Constellation fuselage and the plane's wingtips carry extra gasoline tanks which permit it to stay aloft for more than twenty hours at a time. Inside, the EC-121 is crammed with about 6 tons of modern elint equipment—radar scopes and control consoles, dozens of receivers to sweep across all radio channels, computers, tape recorders and data-processing machines, and several independent navigational systems. In a separate section are bunks, a galley and a latrine. Normally, an EC-121 is aloft long enough so that a second crew of pilots, navigators and elint technicians is needed to relieve the first shift.

Vital: During the course of a twenty-hour flight, an EC-121 will gather an enormous quantity of information. Some of the technicians aboard are fluent in Chinese, Korean and Russian so that they can instantly translate any intercepted radio conversations. Almost all of the information picked up during a flight, however, is ultimately returned to Fort Meade, Md., where it is analyzed by the 20,000-odd employees of the National Security Agency. And esoteric as it may seem, the kind of data produced by the EC-121 is considered by the Pentagon to be vital to the security of the U.S. For in wartime, such intelligence can mean the difference between victory and defeat—as, in fact, it often did in the campaigns the U.S. waged in the Pacific during World War II.